

The University of Chicago

THE FUNCTION OF THE GEO-
GRAPHICAL DATA IN THE
GOSPEL TRADITIONS

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVINITY SCHOOL IN
CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR
OF PHILOSOPHY

1939

By
CHARLES FRANKLIN NESBITT

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IN THE GOSPEL TRADITIONS

The variety and interest of the geography of Palestine were set forth in detail in the early stages of this study, and assumed as fundamental to any historical investigation of the traditions embodied in our Gospels. This can hardly be challenged or denied. The abundance of geographical data so clearly apparent in the Gospel traditions is another basic factor of particular importance for this thesis, giving rise to many necessary questions and problems. These have been examined in the light of all the available data and critical evidence, and their significance was implied or set forth in each successive stage.

Referring to pages 11 and 12, we enumerated three working principles to serve as guides in the examination of the data pertinent to our problem: (1) that the geographical knowledge of the Gospel writers was scientifically accurate in many respects, though uncertain and confusing in others; (2) the teachings and sayings of Jesus assume added significance in the light of their physical setting; (3) many of the biographical facts of Jesus' life, his travels and movements, become more definite and easily followed amidst their true geographical background. Each of these guiding principles seem even more important in the light of the resultant findings than when tentatively set forth in the beginning. Practically all the evidence encountered in the course of study, which involved any important data at all, bore more or less directly on one or more of these principles, and a general summary of the essential details that have emerged now seems appropriate by way of conclusion.

1. In the earlier Gospel narratives, dealing with the birth and childhood stories of Jesus and John the Baptist, the data of geography appear as the kind of material one would expect in a set of traditions so definitely editorial in nature, even approaching the legendary. This is to say that the data in question seem very general and reflective of popular tradition, as if it had come down to the writers and editors in circuitous

fashion. Generally, it lacks the pungency and accuracy of detail found in many of the later traditions, but it does not often give the impression of being mere guesswork or broadly erroneous. Three notable place-names in the early traditions, Bethlehem, Nazareth, Jerusalem, seem to have been the focal points about which the stories of Jesus' early days revolved. And they were place-names as deeply rooted in the geography of the country as in the history and traditions of the early Christian movement.

Luke's data in these stories seem to be more faulty than Matthew's, but the greater vagueness appears in the John the Baptist traditions, especially in the references to the hill country and an unknown city of Judea, as in 1:39, 65. It is true that only Luke has reported the birth-stories of John, but about the same situation appears in the traditions of John's preaching. Both Matthew and Luke report it in greater detail than Mark, but the indefiniteness of all the Synoptics is quite pronounced. There is nothing particularly inconsistent with the known geographic backgrounds of these stories, but the area of certainly known data is relatively small. One point at which the author of the Fourth Gospel is most at fault is when he introduced the puzzling Bethany beyond Jordan notes, at 1:28. The linguistic and geographic data presented in the discussion seem to clear up most of the difficulty. There is unquestionable confusion of the one known Bethany on the outskirts of Jerusalem with the popular but poorly located traditions of John's work in the Jordan territory.

In the Galilean period the definiteness of the geographical data is materially increased in all the Gospels. The one place of greatest importance is Capernaum, and the only specific place-name that Mark noted in the Galilean territory. It was plainly the focal point of that part of Jesus' life to Mark, whereas the other Gospels are more inclusive and at the same time somewhat uncertain in their accuracy of detail. Luke is particularly uncertain in many of the Galilean notes, but his geographic viewpoint and lack of correct information is more clearly observed in the so-called Perean section. This is so patently an editorial invention of Luke's that it is hard to see how the persistent ideas of its being a travel narrative, and happy hunting ground for the harmonists, have prevailed so long even in the popular mind. One certain fact emerges from this study--that it cannot have been a Perean ministry nor a continuous travel narrative on the basis of

the topography involved in these particular traditions. Another fact of equal importance emerging here is the high degree of probability for a Samaritan ministry of Jesus inherent in the persistent Samaritan notes, especially in Luke and John. The geography reflected in these stories better supports the case for a Samaritan than a Perean stage of Jesus' life, though the data in either case are precarious enough except in the sense of probability.

In the later traditions, revolving mainly about the Passion story, many difficult problems were encountered concerning the geography of such places as Bethphage, Bethesda, Golgotha, and the setting of the resurrection appearances. Textual criticism and the linguistic aspects of many problems, in addition to the obvious geographical and archaeological evidence, helps to illuminate them but the final solution of many such questions must await further developments in closely related areas. It seems reasonable to conclude, however, that Bethphage or Beth Page was a territorial designation on the Mount of Olives, between Bethany and Jerusalem, or a sort of limit of the sphere of influence of the Holy City rather than a town or village in its own right. Similar results were shown in the examination of materials bearing on the other places noted. Bethesda or Bethzatha must have been the section of Jerusalem just north of the temple area, in spite of the confusion in more or less legendary details of an intermittently flowing spring. Golgotha was apparently a section just outside the walls on the west, where the church of the Sepulchre now stands. The resurrection appearances, more legendary in character, strongly suggest a Judean rather than a Galilean locale.

2. There is less certainty involved in the results of the examination of the teaching traditions, the sayings and parables of Jesus, in the light of their environmental conditions than in the factors considered above. It has often been suggested that the teachings materials in the Gospels cannot be localized satisfactorily in Palestine, that they fit as well in other lands. There is, of course, some degree of truth in the statement, but it does not tell all the story of the singular appropriateness of these teachings in the Palestinian locale. It was frequently noted, for example, in the examination of the Galilean didactic traditions, that they were of almost universal application in their ethical and moral qualities and might fit into the environ-

ment of other peoples also. But it was urged with equal force that there is no known situation where these precepts could possibly be more appropriate in application than in the country where these traditions were produced and preserved. This fact can hardly be urged too strongly, even at the risk of too frequent repetition.

Most of the teaching and sayings traditions are apparently editorial constructions—certainly so in the larger sections, like the Sermon on the Mount, the Parables by the Sea, and the discourses in the Passion story. Again it may be said that the particular values in this study are not in the setting or arrangement of pertinent materials, but in the contents of the traditions themselves, in the life and thought, the behavior and environment, which they reflect. These editorial collections appeared first in the Galilean period of the public ministry, where the Sermon on the Mount is one of the best illustrations of the authors' practices and the ethical and moral principles which characterized Jesus' insight into the things of life around him. The Beatitudes, so differently set forth in Matthew and Luke, matter not whether spoken on a mountain or a level place, but the unforgettable suggestions of genuine religious value which they represent make up another story. The same is also true in principle of the many parables occurring with unremitting frequency throughout Jesus' career. They are more often truly reflective of physical environment than other forms of teaching traditions, and especially noticeable in their application of the agricultural life of the people, and they in turn suggest the peculiar economy under which the majority of Jesus' hearers had to live. It was surely because of their background of necessary economy that Jesus deliberately fitted his teachings into the agricultural pattern. The same is essentially true of the parables fitted into patterns of the fishing industry, or of the household or marketplace, only on a smaller scale.

Plummer's contention that the editorial nature of the discourse materials of Luke's central section were beyond his powers of invention, is anonus for most of the larger collections of didactic data. It is conceivable that the Gospel writers and editors could have set them in a prearranged pattern, but it is inconceivable that they could have invented on any large scale the actual materials they reported in such convincing form.

Editorial notes and comments were doubtless inserted here and there, or even greater liberties taken with the oral materials so clearly suggestive of the natural environment, but the content of the teachings must have been genuine. Nowhere does this principle appear in a more favorable light than in the discourse materials of the last days in Jerusalem. In the study of the temple traditions above, it was argued that details of physical environment were as genuinely reflective of life about him as in the earlier sayings and parables. The real significance of this appears when it is seen that Jesus was under much greater emotional stress and physical strain in those latter days than in any earlier setting. But in spite of it all his mind ran true to form and revealed his firm conviction that the common-place things about him showed definite evidence of religious truth, that God was in the common life. Such balance of mind and spirit as all this implied, such calmness in the approach to the supreme test of his mission in facing the issues of the last few days, such an attitude is almost impossible for us to imagine. Nor would we ordinarily turn to geography and topography for stabilizing evidences of these spiritual and emotional attitudes, but such are the facts.

3. Consideration of the third summarizing principle brings us again into the realm of greater certainty in regard to the data of the Gospels pertinent to our problem. It is often difficult to distinguish between materials which suggest accurate knowledge on the part of the authors or editors and the biographical facts and travel itineraries of Jesus, but it is a convenient practical distinction.

Some attention was given above to Taylor's viewpoint, that cycles of memorabilia about Jesus were apparently preserved in the various places more definitely identified with his public ministry. This has proven true in general, and the prominence of Capernaum, the Sea of Galilee, the Samaritan notes, the Passion narratives in Jerusalem, all seem to be more reasonably understood in this sense and in the light of their geographical backgrounds than usually thought or otherwise possible. It was almost certainly so in Mark's collection of Capernaum traditions in his early chapters. The variation of details in the parallel accounts of many incidents illustrate the varying interests of the religious communities and the differing needs of the missionaries who used these materials.

In considering the framework of the Gospels, attention was also given to Dodd's view, that among the things which Mark took over from the traditions available to him was an outline of Jesus' whole career as a sort of introduction to the Passion narrative and serving as a background of reference for the more or less miscellaneous materials involved. As a result of this study it seems a reasonable conclusion that something of this sort must have taken place. In the forty years elapsing between the death of Jesus and the composition of Mark's Gospel, it seems impossible that a whole generation would have continued to propagate the Christian movement on the basis of loose and miscellaneous oral traditions. Some real credit must be due the intellectual integrity and ability of the earliest Christians, to have made orderly and comprehensible to their new converts and older adherents the stories about Jesus which they repeated so often and emphasized with so much zeal and effectiveness. It is hardly conceivable that things should have gone on in this more or less haphazard fashion until 70 A.D., and that Mark should have suddenly given order and outline to a set of hitherto heterogeneous and miscellaneous materials serving as the raison d'etre of Christianity. This is not to deny to Mark whatever degree of creative genius he deserves for being the first to put into permanent written form the stories about Jesus and thus produce a Gospel, but it is to maintain for the early Christians a higher degree of appreciation of the materials of their mission than we have to assume otherwise. And again it is the recognition of the importance of the geographical and topographical facts embedded in the traditions that gives assurance to this conviction.

There are numerous details in the traditions illustrative of the way in which places and incidents served to anchor stories in certain localities. John's two notes about Cana must have been meant to preserve a tradition of Jesus' appearance in that town; so of Luke's Nain pericope; perhaps also of the Dalmanutha-Magadan confusion in Mark and Matthew. It is probably safe to conclude that such pericopae were definitely meant to preserve individual traditions or some biographical note about Jesus' visits to such places. In the case of the Gergesa pericopae, the Synoptists' failure to agree on the exact form of the name, or the scribal errors that may have caused that failure, do not obliterate the fact of Jesus having been on the eastern shore of

the lake, and the known geographical setting gives reason and explanation to the incident. The note in Matthew 9:1 about Capernaum being Jesus' own city, even if editorial, doubtless correctly reflects the factual tradition of that city's being the headquarters of the mission in Galilee, and it gives added weight to the prominence of the city in Mark and the Galilean traditions generally. The Jericho pericopae toward the end of his public career is probably another illustration of the same trend in these stories. If not definitely biographical, they must have transparent meaning in the light of their environmental backgrounds. Less specific perhaps, but equally valuable in their commentary on this tendency, are the many similar pericopae concerning the travels on sea and land, numerous vague details involving cities and villages, or such itineraries as the visits to Tyre (and Sidon), and Caesarea Philippi.

The many references to land journeys and sea crossings in Galilee, treated separately for convenience in the foregoing study, are quite puzzling when only a few are considered in isolation, but when all the traditions are taken together they do not present an inconsistent picture. One of the most troublesome collection of travel notes is Mark 4:1 to 7:30, from the "Parables by the Sea" to the Tyre (and Sidon) journey. The context of Mark clearly indicates that Jesus was in the lake territory, probably in the vicinity of Capernaum, and the crossing when the storm was quieted was to the east side where the Gergesa incident was located. From thence they returned to the west coast, where the healing of Jairus' daughter was set in an unnamed locality. It is possible that a brief visit was then made to Nazareth, though this is a very uncertain note. The feeding of the five thousand must have occurred in the neighborhood of Bethsaida on the north-east coast, but how the party got to that section is not clearly reported, unless possibly in the supplementary notes in John; else it was simply another lake crossing. On leaving this north-east territory, another storm on the lake was encountered and Jesus was seen walking on the water, and eventually they landed in the vicinity of Gennesar on the west side again, and soon thereafter they went to Tyre (and Sidon).

One of the most significant factors coming to light in this study is the probable effects of climate and altitude on the health of Jesus. The frequent withdrawals from public view

in the lake country, especially about Capernaum, to desert seclusion was perhaps due more to difference in climate and elevation from the native Nazareth hills than generally suspected. He may have often gone into deserted places to pray, but it is more highly probable that he was driven thence by the enervating depression of the low-lying lake basin and the terrific heat of summer as much as by any innate promptings of the spirit. The molders of the traditions and the writers of the Gospels would not likely give much attention to such mundane matters, since they did not particularly enhance the growth of the Christian movement, but our modern scientific emphasis on the geographic factors and our understanding of their inevitable effects on human health and conduct enable us to see this important truth. Instead of Jesus being subject to physical fatigue and in need of rest, recuperation, and adjustment to a changing environment, the early Christians were thinking of his super-humanity and probably interpreted his unusual behavior as evidence of unique powers that he possessed and his need for prayer and spiritual meditation. Thus, he tapped resources of spiritual strength and religious insight denied his ordinary fellowmen. The psychology of the process is very simple, though malaria and temperature may have been mistaken for piety.

Another feature of special interest and significance emerging from the later traditions is the almost certain confusion in the triumphal entry story. It is still quite apparent that the event took place preliminary to the passover festival, but it is very obvious that the traditional celebration became confused with the somewhat similar tabernacles ritual. The passover occasion was filled with greater significance for emerging Christianity, because it initiated the end of Jesus' earthly career and symbolized the beginning of the new church. But the more popular and colorful tabernacles festal appendages of palm-branches and Hosanna songs were carried over from the latter into the former in the non-discriminating processes of transmission of traditional materials. The joyous nature of the autumn harvest festival was transplanted into the more somber passover observance of spring. But it requires some understanding of the festal customs, their climatic and agricultural aspects, all of which are directly conditioned by the geographical nature of the country, to fully appreciate the confusion and the importance of the

narratives of the triumphal entry.

In final summary, then, the varied function of the geographical data in the Gospel traditions shows that the stories about Jesus are deeply rooted in the soil of the land in which they grew up, reflective of the native life, thought, and religious behavior of the first Christians. It is generally an integral part of the body of traditional material and historical truth which produced the new religious movement and the surviving Christian church. The integrity of the many factors of physical environment is unmistakably increased when we realize that the Gospels as we know them were all probably written outside of Palestine at a much later date. Mark, for example, was perhaps written in Rome about forty years after Jesus' death, and the survival of geographic and topographic detail in the traditions he employed at that remote place and time is definite testimony to the accuracy and persistence of that data in circumstances constantly less favorable to survival than the native scenes in the original Palestinian communities. The same principle holds for the Fourth Gospel, and is greatly increased because of the additional time element and factors of purpose involved in its writing. It seems almost indisputable and a reasonable conclusion, on the basis of sober facts and demonstrable evidence, that our Gospels are bona fide reflections of the religious life, hopes and ideals, and physical environment of the country in which Christianity arose. The persistence of their geographic nature through the vicissitudes of time, far beyond its original borders, despite an emerging philosophy and theology, is nothing short of amazing and probably paralleled nowhere else in the category of world religions. All this should materially increase our appreciation of the figure of Jesus as its motivating force, and enable us to see him in his native setting in spite of the fragmentary nature of the Gospel records.

